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ABSTRACT

Though the expressivist and process movements rightly banished literary interpretation from the writing class, they went much too far in similarly banishing the study of texts and reading in favor of the "productive" act of writing. This paper argues that undergraduates can play their "professors' game," the Burkean parlor game of Kristeva's intertextuality and Bakhtin's heteroglossia. The paper asks how professors can teach their students the "new rules," and it contends that the ideal place to issue the invitation is the freshman composition class that so long ago was declared off-limits to reading. It states that it is time to recognize that reading, too, is productive, both as the crucial flip side of writing and as a significant part of the conversation that leads to production and affirmation of new meaning and knowledge. It argues that it is time to introduce students to the sorts of reading--critical and contributive--on which their professors, as professional academics, rely. The paper first provides an overview of what is known about elementary reading instruction and about high school and informational reading. It then discusses critical and contributive reading and details ways of teaching such reading in the composition course. The paper concludes that since one semester of reading instruction is rarely sufficient to produce marked change, the next difficult but necessary step will be trying to quantify any improvement. (Contains 29 references.) (NKA)

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# Rethinking Dogma: Teaching Critical Thinking in Freshman Composition.

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Paper presented at the 90th Annual Convention of the National Council of Teachers of English
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CS 217 401

# Rethinking Dogma:
# Teaching Critical Reading in Freshman Composition

## Introduction

It was a writing program administrator who deluded me, in the beginning. "Your students are much better readers than they are writers," said she of the basic-writing grounding to her wide-eyed new TA's. It sounded good, but three weeks into class I was praying she was wrong: if their reading was *better* than their writing, my students' writing must be horrific.

She was wrong. It turns out that their writing is usually just fine. Actually, their reading is just fine, too, if we all close our eyes and imagine we're in high school. Somewhere between the school down the block and the one atop the hill, the rules get switched on our students. Unfortunately, the school on the hill but rarely notifies students of that switch. While they continue the game of one-shot, high-speed reading for bold print and fact, imbibing Truth and memorizing the right answers in a caricature of Peter Elbow's "Believing Game," their professors play a different game, the Burkean parlor game of Kristeva's intertextuality and Bakhtin's heteroglossia, knowledge affirmed by conversation enacted through a web of textuality.

Should our undergrads play our game? If so, how can we teach them the new rules? I want to argue today that they can and should join our happy throng, and that the ideal place to issue the invitation is the freshman composition class that so long ago was declared off-limits to reading. Though the expressivist and process movements rightly, in my mind, banished literary interpretation from the writing class, they went much too far in similarly banishing the study of texts and reading in favor of the "productive" act of writing. It's time we recognize that reading, too, is productive, both as the crucial flipside of writing and as a significant part of the conversation that leads to production and affirmation of new meaning and knowledge. It's time,

in other words, to introduce students to the sorts of reading—critical and contributive—on which their professors, as professional academics, rely. Our undergraduates, our freshmen, *can* enter our parlors if, as Bartholomae argues, we give them means. How we might do so—paradoxically, by taking a leaf from pre-high-school reading instruction—is my focus today.

What We Know About Elementary Reading Instruction

In "Ongoing Research and New Directions," Robert Tierney lists differences in the way elementary reading used to be taught separately from writing, versus how we now teach it as integrated with writing:

- Reading and writing are taught together rather than separately
- Reading and writing programs are developed from a list of skills and behaviors that apply to both processes
- Writing and reading occur . . . in collaboration, not excluded from each other
- Multiple texts (opposed to the use of single texts) are used to write, synthesize, pursue projects, develop reports, or analyze
- Early writing involves allowing students to approximate and pursue conventions based on emerging hypotheses about language and how it works, rather than dictated stories and activities focused on mastering conventions. (248-49)

Studies by Judith Langer and by Marion Crowhurst support Tierney's assertion that reading and writing are better taught in combination than separately. Extensive research on the mechanics of reading reveals that reading is in fact a writing process in all but the act of inscribing words on a page. Numerous studies and theory explaining reading as a constructive act demonstrate that writing and reading are inextricable, and are best taught as such (Haas and Flower, Iser, Scholes, Spivey, Spivey and King, Tierney and Pearson, and Troyka).

Acknowledging the way reading is taught at the elementary level raises some contradictory questions. If this pedagogy works so well, for instance, why does reading even need to be taught at the college level? If, on the other hand, writing and reading are so entwined, why would we teach writing but not reading in college? We teach writing at the college level because we recognize that college demands kinds of writing that students have not learned. Might college demand different kinds of reading than students have learned, and might instruction in such reading be beneficial as well?

High School and Informational Reading

Until about sixth grade, reading is revered (even in a PlayStation society) and kids can't get their hands on enough books (Brandt). About that time, reading education stops (Adler and Van Doren ix, Granger 4-5, Haas 19-20, Pearson and Tierny 170). The purpose of reading changes: instead of reading for pleasure or for answers to self-initiated questions, students read to assimilate information for tests. This purpose consumes them. At the end of a day filled with school reading, most students refuse to read anymore (Evans, Purves). At the same time, the only available reading classes are literary—though many students receive little training in true literary reading (a kind of critical reading). By graduation, only a small group of verbally blessed students reads for anything other than tests or quick information. In 1981, the National Assessment of Education Progress found that teens did little pleasure reading, would not read for extended periods of time, and preferred movies to books. Older students were less committed to reading than younger ones (Purves 2). After more than 15 years, the situation has not improved. NAEP figures for 1996 show that 54 percent of 9-year-olds read for fun, but only 32 percent of 13-year-olds do, and by the time they turn 17, only 23 percent of students read daily for fun (United States 116).

When reading instruction ends and students' main purpose for reading shifts from pleasure to test preparation, certain strategies and approaches to reading become engrained that differ significantly from the habits and beliefs of those who are reading to "invent the university." Margaret Kantz argues that students fail to see texts as being produced by people, by thinkers. They read for the right answer and see texts as Truth, immutable fact (79). They read by consumption, mining for information and facts, exactly as they have been taught. They tend to take from literature classes either the notion that a text means only one thing or that it can mean whatever a reader wants it to. They believe good readers only have to read once, and that good readers are those who can best remember the text. Pearson and Tierney argue that "most students view reading competency as the ability to read rapidly a single text once with maximum recall" (152). College reading instruction, when it happens at all, reinforces this view of "good" reading: it focuses on vocabulary comprehensive and various methods for more effectively mining the text for information (see Stahl, Simpson, and Brozo 31-32).

This "worldview" of reading brought to college by students leads John Heyda to argue that "it is in their comparative lack of familiarity with processes of reading . . . that students are found wanting now" (145). It is obvious that the reading strategies and habits that get students successfully through high school and into college—the kind of reading, for instance, rewarded by standardized tests—are not the same as those college itself frequently rewards. Instead of blaming either the students or the system, resolution begins when we recognize that there are many ways of reading and make explicit to students the different ways of reading college requires.

Critical and Contributive Reading

One of the most common reactions I get when discussing the teaching of reading in the freshman composition course is a question along the lines of, "What do you mean by 'teaching

reading'?" There are many levels, or kinds, of reading, of course, and the kind of reading done by a reader depends on her abilities and her purpose. The kind of reading one does when reading the side of a cereal box can be much different from the kind of reading involved in reading a newspaper editorial, or closed captions on a television show, or instructions for a VCR. And a first-grader's reading of these media may differ from a college student's reading of them. Understanding texts as constructed dialogues, as subject to/subjects of intertextuality and heteroglossia, necessitates that students completely rethink reading. Instead of mining, accepting, and believing, they must learn what their professors at some point learned: how to responsibly have one's way with a text.

The reading that most of us refer to as "critical" reading is largely attitudinal. We understand it as questioning, interrogating, investigating, and critiquing a text; challenging it, wondering about it, inferring from it. Critical reading possesses texts. In *Teaching College Students to Read Analytically*, Cooper, Evans, and Robinson define critical reading by opposing it to informational reading. To them, critical reading "transcends . . . mere vocabulary recognition or text recall," going beyond high speed or clear comprehension in reading (2-3). Taking a more literary approach, Robert Scholes insists that a critical reading cannot leave a text alone—it "must indeed get somewhere, must open some new perspective on the text read, and not simply double or repeat the text respectfully" (78). It must be, after a fashion, "disrespectful" (78). The task of a critical reader is analytical and evaluative: to see how a text is built, and to form an opinion about how its construction matches what is known of the author's purposes. Critical reading seeks first an *accurate* reading of the text—by which I mean simply seeing and reading the text as it actually appears. This can be as simple as not reading "experiment" when the text says "experience," or as difficult as picking out the path of a dense and complex sentence rather than accepting the general idea after the first main clause. After accurately reading the text, the critical

reader goes in the opposite direction, stepping *away* from the text through inference and conscious reception. When reading critically, the reader has *consciously* added her own ideas to the existing text, deliberately creating a "virtual" text that blends her ideas with the author's.

A contributive reader, along with these steps, takes another. She turns the text outward to consciously compare its fit within a framework of previously read texts and currently held ideas, molding this text and others into a new array of meaning, a synthesis, a *contribution*. Unlike critical reading, which generally serves at most as a conversation between a reader and a particular author, contributive reading allows the reader to view a text as one voice in an ongoing conversation, a voice which, along with various others, the reader can alter. By reorganizing or completely remaking others' ideas, the reader develops original contributions to whatever discussion she has joined. This is the activity propounded by Doug Brent in *Reading as Rhetorical Invention*; it is the idea that contributive reading is engagement of intertextuality or heteroglossia. Unlike even critical reading, which by definition remains primarily focused on a particular text, contributive reading is an act of conversation, turning a text outward to make sense of a wider context. Contributive reading is, in other words, central to academic work.

The critical or contributive reader brings everything she's got to the table: personal experience, prior reading, imagination, comprehension aids, and the text itself. She will consciously adjust her reading speed, depth, and strategies for the material she reads and the context in which she reads it. And when she sees the need, she is quick to revise her reading process or the virtual, synthesized text she's produced. Reading in this fashion leaves the reader physically tired and drained—it is difficult, takes effort and energy. It is the very essence of academic work, yet it is the reading that new college students often do not even know exists, much less its importance in college-level work.

Before I move on, I want to re-emphasize a word I use in my descriptions of critical and

contributive reading: *consciously*. As far as reading researchers can tell, there is no part of critical or contributive reading that isn't done automatically and unconsciously by all fluent readers. The difference is one of intentionality: a critical or contributive reader actively searches for textual implications, connections to personal experience, or connections to other texts in a wider conversation. With consciousness or intentionality comes *control* of the process. This call for teaching reading is not to say, then, that students need to be taught how to interrogate texts or connect them to wider contexts; by virtue of being able to read, they already do this, usually unconsciously. When we teach critical and contributive reading, then, we're teaching what's already happening—making it conscious and making control of it a priority.

Playing it out: Teaching critical and contributive reading in the composition classroom

I'm arguing today that the first-year composition course is not only a practical but a felicitous place for conscious, formal instruction in critical and contributive reading. As I detail ways of teaching such reading in the composition course, the reasons for this felicity will become clear. To begin, though, I need to be a bit defensive. Composition, as a field, has worked long and hard at ensuring the composition course is not an introduction to literature, and any suggestion that a classroom be reading-centered rather than writing-centered can only be met with suspicion. Yet it seems similarly untenable to suggest that reading is inconsequential to writing, particularly given the field's emphasis on peer response and revision, both of which *are* reading-centered activities. Two qualifications may quell most of the suspicion of reading. The first is the simple reminder that "reading" is not synonymous with "literature." Teaching reading does not mean reintroducing literature—unless one secretly believes that "student writing" cannot be read critically or contributively. It only makes sense, really, to privilege student writing while focusing on reading. The second qualification is the less intuitive one: teachers of reading in a writing

course should adopt a foregrounding/backgrounding strategy that *doesn't* make reading a constant focus. In other words, "teaching reading" does not mean doing reading and not writing for eight out of sixteen weeks. Reading can be foregrounded for a week near the beginning of the course and then backgrounded until "teachable moments" reward temporarily foregrounding it again.

Along with the foregrounding/backgrounding principle come three other global principles for teaching reading. First, let metacognition do the work. Take advantage of the fact that we're working with college students rather than kindergartners, and know that the simple act of making reading conscious—the process, the behaviors of readers—will be enough to begin changing reading habits. Second, believe and tell students that reading is just as developmental as writing. That is, we do not think it strange that college writing requires dedicated instruction; we should not think it strange that college reading does, either, though we're conditioned to think so. Removing the stigma from reading instruction beyond sixth grade is only acknowledging what has always been true. Third, take every opportunity to connect reading and writing. Every act of writing involves reading and every act of reading involves writing (the virtual text); so act like it. As we will see shortly, this reading/writing connection is what makes the composition classroom so fruitful a place for reading instruction.

First, however, the writing teacher who teaches reading will need to dedicate some class time to explaining reading theory and ways of reading. Students first need to understand how meaning is constructed from marks on a page, that reading is a writing process (Tierney and Pearson) and that much of the meaning "in" a text is actually placed there by what's already in the reader's head (Brent, Spivey, Troyka). In other words, students must be convinced that reading is, in fact, the process of constructing a virtual text from the blueprint of the actual text. To fully accept that premise, students also need a primer in social epistemology and textuality. They must

know that knowledge is synthesized and adopted by consensus. This direct reading instruction must also show students ways of reading. Students need demonstrations, visual and procedural evidence, that informational, critical, and contributive reading are qualitatively different and are used for different purposes. This leads to a fourth area of instruction, rhetorical reading (as explained by Kantz). Rhetorical reading, or critical reading through a heuristic of rhetorical analysis, is one of the most accessible "ways of reading" that students are likely to encounter, and instruction in it should be explicit. Ultimately, all explicit reading instruction comes down to modeling: always *show* real-world reading.

Showing contributive reading through explicit instruction is, as I've noted, only a small part of actual reading instruction. The rest comes through consistent classroom behavior, including a constant confrontation of embedded myths of reading and the undesirability of reading. Remember the conceptions of reading that students bring with them to college: that texts have either one correct meaning or, if they're literary, no correct meaning; that good readers only have to read once; that good reading leads to memorization; and that reading assignments are "skip-able" in the absence of a test. The entire writing course should problematize (to put it gently) such conceptions of reading: the class should be constructed in such a way that those attitudes toward reading will simply be unsuccessful. Every reading of text is an opportunity to demonstrate multiplicity of readings, the importance of re-reading, the necessity of annotation and the impossibility of holding a whole text in one's mind during serious use of it, and the fact that reading is the grounds not just for successful test-taking but for successful writing.

At the same time, teachers should be up-front about the costs and benefits of critical and contributive reading. Instead of exaggerating how easy or fast this reading is, as often seems to happen even in reading textbooks, we need honesty about the sheer time and effort necessitated by critical and contributive reading. Still, we should not sell short the benefits. Research on the

correlation between being a good reader and being a good student consistently demonstrates that better readers are better students (Cooper, Evans, and Robertson; Haas; McGinley; Olshavsky). My own data, in a self-reporting study of 600 students enrolled in first-year composition at a small midwestern university, show that GPA correlated with use of reading strategies such as underlining, marginalia, reading notebook, and reading all or part of a text twice. The more a student used such strategies, the higher their GPA was likely to be. The importance of reading homework to students also correlated with greater use of reading strategies. Most interestingly, students in higher GPA brackets tended to perceive being assigned more reading homework than did students whose GPAs were lower. Obviously this data cannot be taken for more than it's worth. For instance, it cannot demonstrate causality in any respect. In fact, it may show nothing more than that people who care more about being good students get higher grades. But even knowing that—that grades are a result of effort and engagement rather than (or even along with) innate ability—gives us grounds to tell our students that the work pays off in very tangible terms.

Ultimately, though, teachers in a writing class can only make reading count for that class, and the writing class itself presents special opportunities to make reading count in practice. As Hass notes, "the day-to-day business of English classes is bound up in texts" (19). What is more natural in a writing class, for instance, than writing in response to reading? More than in other classes, reading questions (questions written in response to reading) and reading notebooks are a natural fit. Given that so much writing, researched and otherwise, springs from reading, the writing class is a natural space to insist that students consistently use reading strategies such as underlining and annotation. One other form of writing in response to reading is what Bruce Ballenger calls "writing in the middle": voluminous freewriting and even essay-writing in the note-taking stage of a research project (107-109). All these written responses to reading fit perfectly the writing teacher's goal of getting students to engage texts and produce new texts based on

existing ones—to read critically and contributively.

Nor should teachers ignore "peer response," or "reader response," as I've taken to calling it, as a site that not only allows but frankly requires reading instruction. As instructors too often we blame ineffective peer response on the peers' writing skills, not connecting the "Good paper, Dude" syndrome to the phenomena that produces blank stares when we ask for an opinion on the day's reading. Since students' natural tendencies are likely to be quick, informational reading, it makes sense to use reader-response sessions as an opportunity to reset that expectation—to point out that the only reading which will help the writer is an engaged, critical reading that also engages the writer. Reader response demonstrates blatantly to students the inadequacy of emphasizing speed and information when reading, taking a text at face value and failing to ask questions, and reading without a pencil. Given that writing classes are one of the few places reader response sessions can be found, it's clear that once again writing courses are uniquely suited to reading instruction.

I've been attempting to teach reading in my writing classes for a couple years now, and I can't report earth-shaking success. As is often also the case with writing, one semester of reading instruction is rarely sufficient to produce marked change. Trying to quantify any improvement will be a difficult, though necessary, next step. Still, I don't need numerical data to tell me that students are hearing things about reading in my class that they've never heard before. I've seen their peer response improve in the context of formal reading instruction. And, knowing what I know now about reading, teaching reading in my writing classes is the only way I can sleep soundly. In Troyka's words, "I don't know anymore how to teach students about writing without teaching them about reading" (188).

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